

# Hunter, Trader and Explorer? The Unvarnished Reminiscences of H.F. Fynn

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At the time of Farewell's trading expedition to Port Natal in 1824<sup>1</sup>, English writing was fairly well established in the context of the Cape Colony (Ross 1993:192-204). From the beginning of the nineteenth century, a specific genre of travel writing had emerged in the Cape and when the first writers began to describe European activity in the interior, they followed the dominant patterns established by this framework (Pratt 1992:58-69). Broadly speaking, the kinds of literary depiction that had evolved by the 1820s were based on the essential differences between Europeans and indigenous people and during the 1830s, this Cape colonial discourse crystallised into what Crais has termed a dichotomy between 'Empire and the Savages' (Crais 1992:125-131).

## Utilising Fynn: Early Writing on Natal 1830-1850.

In January 1829, two Cape travellers, Alexander Cowie and Benjamin Green, crossed the Mzimvubu river and proceeded to Fynn's *umuzi* on the Mzimkhulu where they were hosted for a few days. Fynn escorted them to Dingane who provided them with supplies and permission to request food from *imizi* under his jurisdiction on their way to Delagoa Bay where they planned to open further trading networks. The expedition was unsuccessful and on their return journey in April 1829 they contracted malaria and died from the disease (Leverton 1989:176). A 'hottentot' servant of Fynn's had accompanied the ill-fated expedition and he returned with their travel notes which Fynn then forwarded to J.C. Chase, a prominent eastern Cape colonist (Kirby 1968:190-193) who then constructed an official report for the colonial office (Kirby n.d.:184). Chase realised that Fynn was an important source of information on the interior and in December 1829 he wrote to him requesting written material on indigenous peoples in the Port Natal hinterland and historical information on Shaka<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> My paper to the Southern African Society for Eighteenth Century Studies Conference, 27-30 September 1995 (University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg), aimed to explore the literary context of Fynn's early Cape career prior to 1824.

<sup>2</sup> NAFP 1,1: Chase to Fynn, 10 December 1829. This abbreviation (NAFP) is used throughout to refer to 'Natal Archives, Fynn Papers'.

Although Chase did not utilise this material until he published his book on Natal in 1843, his contact with Fynn in 1829 marked the beginning of a trend in using Fynn as a source for written depictions of the Natal region. From 1831, Robert Godlonton, the eastern Cape landowner and politician and editor of the settler-focused paper, *The Grahamstown Journal* (Le Cordeur 1981:64f) relied heavily on Fynn for both letters and editorials on Natal. The gist of the Fynn-based material which appeared in *The Grahamstown Journal* was clearly biased towards Europeans and contained derogatory remarks about the 'hostile disposition' of indigenous peoples<sup>3</sup>. British officials like Andrew Smith and traders like James Collis also sent reports based on information which they obtained from Fynn to Godlonton's paper<sup>4</sup>. In 1835, Godlonton published his own narrative of the frontier conflict of that year and used material which he had gleaned from Fynn to substantiate his argument for the necessity of immediate official British rule over inherently anarchical African societies to the north of the Cape Colony, Shaka and Dingane being instances of the kind of 'violent disposition' displayed by local rulers (Godlonton [1835]1965:161).

Godlonton was not the first Cape merchant who realised the significance value of negative depiction in order to encourage official British involvement in Port Natal and its valuable commercial hinterland. As early as 1832, Nathaniel Isaacs, a trading acquaintance of Fynn, had written his now infamous letter in which he pointed out the importance of portraying the Zulu as 'bloodthirsty' so that the British authorities would realise the necessity for colonial control in Natal<sup>5</sup>. Although based in St Helena and West Africa from the 1830s, Isaacs continued to urge Fynn to publish, repeatedly stressing the utility of published works in persuading the government to formally annex Natal<sup>6</sup>. In his own book, published in 1836, Isaacs deliberately constructed Shaka as the worst kind of tyrant (Wylie 1991:70-91) and depicted his atrocities as the excessive actions of a psychopath (Wylie 1992:410-418). For Isaacs ([1836]1936:30-31;73), Fynn was the perfect counterpart to Shaka and he carefully juxtaposed the two individuals as the representatives of civilised humanity and sub-human savagery.

J. C. Chase, in the meantime, had continued to obtain material from Fynn dur-

<sup>3</sup> See for example, *The Grahamstown Journal* 12 August 1831; 21 September 1832; 29 November 1832; 17 June 1834; 7 August 1834.

<sup>4</sup> *The Grahamstown Journal* 15 June 1832; 28 June 1832; 24 August 1832; 28 September 1832; 22 November 1832.

NAFP 1,10: Isaacs to Fynn, December 1832.

NAFP 1,13: Isaacs to Fynn, 20 June 1836; I,26: Isaacs to Fynn, 7 September 1840.

ing the 1830s<sup>7</sup> and during the 1840s, realising that this information was valuable in arguing for British annexation he published his collection of manuscripts as *The Natal Papers* (Chase 1968). Included in this publication was a lengthy description of Shaka, probably originally obtained from Fynn, but similar to that in Isaacs' 1836 book. Chase depicted Shaka in the most negative terms, portraying him as a 'South African Attila' who had been responsible for the death of one million people (Chase 1968:20). Unlike Isaacs, however, he did not deploy Fynn as counterpart to Shaka and instead used Fynn as a dependable source on the 'history of the tribes' and their helpless position as fugitives in the wasteland which had resulted from Shaka's atrocities. For Chase, Fynn's evidence of the traders' actions in providing patronage for these people under their collective 'chieftainship' was written, and therefore indisputable proof, that the communities in Natal were in urgent need of the benefits offered by British rule (Chase 1969:34). Chase's publication represented the beginnings of an official 'settler' historiography of the Natal region (Smith 1988:14f), just as Donald Moodie's work *The Record* had marked the onset of a general South African historiography between 1838 and 1841 (Ross 1993:192f). By the time of the official annexation of Natal in 1843, there already existed a considerable literature on the region's past, many accounts being based directly or indirectly on Fynn's earliest observations in the 1830s.

### **Colonial Natal 1850-1855: Contextualising the Fynn Text**

Upon his return to Natal in 1852 as a colonial official, Fynn was well established as an accepted authority on the region. In 1850 Bishop Gray, on a reconaissance trip to Natal had consulted Fynn for information on the African people in Natal<sup>8</sup>. Gray based his own ideas on Fynn on the images propagated by Isaacs and Chase that Fynn had been a 'chief' over refugees at Port Natal (Gray 1850:88-102). This notion of Fynn as someone who had had intimate knowledge of the indigenous communities in Natal, was, by the 1850s, a widely accepted concept and it was important in providing a basis for the way in which he was viewed in the colony. In 1852 Fynn's supposed knowledge obtained him a position as an interpreter for Pine's commission on land distribution in Natal and his 'evidence' on Shaka's 'devastation' of the region<sup>9</sup> became the foundation for the European history of the colony which emerged during the 1850s (Wright 1989:277).

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<sup>7</sup> NAFP 1,6: Chase to Fynn, 14 November 1834.

<sup>8</sup> NAFP 2,119: Gray to Fynn, 26 March 1850; 2,122: Gray to Fynn, 27 May 1850.

<sup>9</sup> *Proceedings and Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Past and Present State of the Kafirs in the District of Natal*. 1853 pp. 5f.

By the mid-1850s, Fynn was not only an acknowledged source of historical information<sup>10</sup>, but was also as a Resident Magistrate, a respectable member of colonial society<sup>11</sup>. This was in a sense a continuation of his role as an official in the Cape colony during the 1830s and 1840s and was in marked contrast to his early career at Port Natal. At the time of the traders' initial settlement at Port Natal, the process of 'going native' was to a large degree accepted by colonial reporters as an activity elected by isolated Europeans who found themselves among indigenous people<sup>12</sup>. In 1832, Godlonton reported in the *Grahamstown Journal* that Fynn and his fellow traders at Port Natal were 'placed (like Robinson Crusoe) out of reach of humanity and its laws'<sup>13</sup>. A notable example of Fynn's particular assimilation into Zulu society was Isaacs' description in his 1836 publication where he portrayed Fynn as practically naked and hardly recognisable as a European (Isaacs 1936:95).

However, during the course of the century the idea of 'going native' became increasingly repugnant to Europeans (Street 1975:8), as notions of separate races and inherent difference became more clearly defined in colonial society (Collits 1994:66). By the 1850s, when Fynn constructed his reminiscences, travellers in Natal who met him were pointing out that his living 'completely as a native' was 'probably more from necessity than choice' (Spohr 1965:91). By the end of the nineteenth century, individuals who had known Fynn as a magistrate in Natal in the 1850s, were placing him in an established colonial setting and depicted him as a European who had distinct authority over the blacks under his jurisdiction<sup>14</sup>. George Russell for instance, remembered Fynn administering flogging sentences without so much as looking up from his snuff box. Local Africans who were given these punishments would then 'respectfully' greet Fynn with the title *inkosi* before leaving his magisterial office (Russell 1899:171).

Fynn's position as a magistrate in Natal made him an invaluable link between colonial and African society. Officials, settlers and missionaries all viewed him as a source of knowledge on indigenous people<sup>15</sup>. John William Colenso, appointed by Bishop Gray as Natal's first Anglican bishop in 1853, toured the colony in 1854, and, despite his condemnation of colonial attitudes (Titlestand 1993:201), he recognised

<sup>10</sup> *The Natal Mercury* 14 April 1853; 21 April 1853; 28 April 1853.

<sup>11</sup> NAFP 3,209: Labouchere to Fynn, 29 July 1853.

<sup>12</sup> *Cape Town Gazette and African Advertiser* 6 January 1826.

<sup>13</sup> *The Grahamstown Journal* 3 August 1832.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Webb & Wright (1976:277).

<sup>15</sup> NAFP 3,219: Daniel Lindley to Fynn, 27 October 1855; 3,222: Shepstone to Fynn, 2 January 1857.

Fynn as someone who was as 'well acquainted with the natives' as Shepstone (Colenso 1855:216). Fynn's unique knowledge was, for Colenso, that of an expert on the Shakan period and he borrowed Fynn's written notes for his own publication<sup>16</sup> which included material on Shaka's 'continual ravages' of the Natal region (Colenso 1855:ix-x), and his behaviour following Nandi's death (Colenso 1855:225-227), accurately recorded by Fynn who was an eye-witness to these events (Colenso 1855:216). Colenso also used the information he obtained from Fynn for his 1856 Zulu language publication on the people living in the Natal region prior to and during the reign of Shaka (Colenso 1856:12-24).

### **Colonial Natal 1855-1860: Producing the Fynn Text**

In 1856, Robert Struthers replaced Robert Moreland as Fynn's clerk and interpreter (Clark 1972:146). Struthers had spent the four years prior to this appointment in trading and hunting in Zululand (Struthers 1991:16-21). As a competent speaker of Zulu, Fynn had no need of an interpreter and later evidence given by Fynn's son to James Stuart suggests that Struthers' main task was secretarial and that he in fact assisted Fynn in collating and writing up his notes during 1858 and 1859<sup>17</sup>. Although Struthers' own hunting and trading reminiscences were not published during his lifetime, his career in Zululand from 1852 to 1856 had been successful and he had made substantial profits during this period (Struthers 1991:15).

Although hunting and trading in the Natal-Zululand region had changed considerably in the period between Fynn's activities in the 1820s and Struthers' trips in the 1850s, it is possible to view Fynn's writing as part of a general nineteenth century 'hunter-trader' literature. Hunting in Southern Africa had, particularly in terms of large game like elephant, moved beyond the Cape by the 1820s as the 'elephant frontier' was pushed beyond the borders of the colony (McKenzie 1988:62). As more European hunters ventured into the interior, the 'hunting journal' became a well established genre in Victorian imperial literature<sup>18</sup>. Stephen Gray has described these hunting texts as a genre which 'epitomizes the pioneering, frontier-type experience' (Gray 1979:97f). While Fynn may have recorded the earliest instance of European elephant hunting from Port Natal, this activity was well-established in the region by the time that Struthers

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<sup>16</sup> NAFP 6,60: Colenso to Fynn Junior, 23 March 1880.

<sup>17</sup> Killie Campbell Africana Library, Fynn Family Papers, File no. 30104, Extract no. 4, Notes on the Life of H. Fynn, dictated to James Stuart by Fynn junior, December 1906, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Notable examples are Harris ([1841]1969), Drummond (1875).

started to work on Fynn's manuscripts in the 1850s<sup>19</sup>. Fynn's description of a European-aided elephant hunt in which sixteen elephants were killed (Stuart & Malcolm 1950:120) pales into insignificance when compared with Struthers' journal where two or three elephants were shot on an almost daily basis (Struthers 1991:29-30).

Oral evidence collected by James Stuart in the early twentieth century points to an increase in elephant hunting in Natal from the 1820s, resulting from European instigated ivory trade from Port Natal (Webb & Wright 1979:144). Fynn, said one informant was 'the greatest ivory trader' (Webb & Wright 1976: 111f). However, later research suggests that Farewell's ivory trade from Port Natal although important<sup>20</sup> did not occur on any significant scale (Hedges 1978:232-234). Archaeological evidence has pointed to the predominance of Delagoa Bay rather than Port Natal trade up to the 1840s (Hall 1987:126f), several years after Fynn left Natal in 1834. Fynn's comment that 'Shaka's consternation was great' on being shown European firearms in action (Stuart & Malcolm 1950:120) is difficult to conceptualise in the context of considerable trade with Europeans through Delagoa Bay. Even during the 1850s, when the Natal-Zululand firearm trade was well-established, Struthers noted that it was relatively simple for Mpande to obtain arms and ammunition from Delagoa (Struthers 1991:47f). Oral evidence from King Cetshwayo in the 1880s suggests that Fynn and the Europeans were important in providing trade goods like blankets rather than firearms (Webb & Wright 1978:9). A final point on the trade issue is Julian Cobbing's argument for Fynn's participation in the east coast slave trade (Cobbing 1992:15-17). This remains contested and there is no coherent material in Fynn's writing to either support or negate this proposition (Hamilton 1992:42-45).

Fynn, like other Victorian writers on Africa, depicted himself as one of the earliest European visitors to the interior, reporting that on one occasion he sent African retainers in advance of his party to a local homestead 'to guard against causing too great a surprise to the people on entering their kraal, for we were declared to be the first Europeans who had paid them a visit' (Stuart & Malcolm 1950:102), the context of nineteenth century literature on Africa, he was one of the majority of literate recorders who viewed the continent from a narrow European perspective (Davidson 1964:36f). By the 1850s, travellers' accounts had become a curious blend of reality and fiction, often based on a version of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (Knox-Shaw 1987:143f) and there is no reason to see Fynn's (or Struthers') particular travellers' tale as an exception to this trend. Fynn's statement that

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<sup>19</sup> Examples of hunting expeditions to Natal are Webb (1990:169-175), Hummel & Craig (1994:19-24).

<sup>20</sup> Leverton 1984:17, Campbell to Bell, 10 October 1828.

Taking my kaffir interpreter, Frederick, with me, I walked round to the head of the bay in search of inhabitants; we came across none, though we found several foot-prints (Stuart & Malcolm 1950:60).

contains the main elements in Defoe's novel—the loyal 'Man Friday', the uninhabited beach and the suggestive footprints (Pratt 1989:15-18).

Fynn's account also reflected the 'alien' African context which J.M. Coetzee and other scholars have described (Coetzee 1988:chapter 1; Wade 1993:1-2). This has been a consistent theme from the early 1800 and there is a continuity between, for instance, Barrow's conceptualisation of the 'savage' and innately hostile Cape indigenous communities (Barrow 1802:28) to Burton's 'pallid and sickly green' east African landscape (Burton [1856]1982:129) and Mostert's Cape Point which he describes as a place of 'the greatest loneliness on earth' (Mostert 1992:8). Fynn's description of the Delagoa Bay hinterland as a place where

fevers and ague prevail owing to the humidity of the air, the wind bringing with it noxious vapours rising from extensive swamps (Stuart & Malcolm 1950:47).

can be viewed as belonging to the same category.

In sharp contrast to the inhospitable south-east African environment were Europeans' reports of the treatment they received from local communities. Fynn described in some detail the way in which a 'native doctor and several women' successfully treated him for malaria (Webb & Wright 1978:42f). He also noted that even people that tended to treat Europeans with suspicion, would never refuse to feed a hungry traveller (Webb & Wright 1978:107). Although later travellers were able to rely on missionary stations for medical care, hunter-traders during the 1850s also mentioned Zulu hospitality. W.C. Humphreys, for instance, on his journey through Mpande's kingdom in 1851, noted that an important headman, Nongalaza ka Nondela, was 'exceedingly kind' to him (Pridmore 1993:12).

Another thread in Fynn's narrative is his discovery of the wreck of the *Grosvenor*, an East Indiaman shipwreck on the east coast in 1782 (Stuart and Malcolm 1993:100f). Although there had been information available on this wreck from the *Grosvenor*'s survivors since the eighteenth century (Kirby 1953), Fynn stressed his own role in identifying the site of the remains. Images of castaways were evident in Cape-based literature from the seventeenth century (Vigne [1748]1993)<sup>21</sup>, and the 'discovery' of shipwrecks has remained a fairly common theme in writing on white exploration of the interior (Becker 1985:90-102).

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<sup>21</sup> The narrative was set between 1686 and 1689.

Although much of Fynn's writing can be seen as part of a general nineteenth century literature on the South African interior, encompassing a number of European attitudes towards Africa, there is much truth in James Stuart's remark that Fynn stood in a 'category of his own' (Stuart & Malcolm 1950:ix). It is Fynn's (or Struthers') particular varnishing that has made the Fynn *Diary* into what Cobbing has termed 'the greatest publishing disaster' in South African literature (Cobbing 1988:524). I have elsewhere dealt with the question of Fynn's personal motives in constructing his journal in order to obtain a land grant in colonial Natal (Pridmore 1991:24-26). It was these motives which led him to construct specific images of his own role in Shaka's presence, and these images were produced in the context of colonial Natal in the 1850s.

Although not published until 1888, specific ideas, in the Fynn text, for instance that of Fynn doctoring Shaka were particularly well received by colonial readers as they blended in with white settlers' own perception of their imperial role (Denoon 1988:121-125). Similarly, Fynn's negative depiction of Shaka found fertile ground in the developing historiography of Natal (Wylie forthcoming)<sup>22</sup>. It is these varnishings which have led to the widespread abuse of Fynn as a supposedly authoritative source, particularly since the publication of *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn* in 1950 (Pridmore 1994:60-72). A comparative approach within the wide context of nineteenth century literature on the Natal region seems to offer a more informed perspective.

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<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Dan Wylie for shared discussion on the draft of this paper.



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J. Pridmore

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